

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 352 736

EA 024 550

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TITLE Putting Public School Choice into Perspective: A New Paradigm.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 8p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Access to Education; *Educational Change; Educational Innovation; Elementary Secondary Education; Equal Education; Incentives; Models; *Nontraditional Education; Program Development; *Public Schools; *School Choice

ABSTRACT

A new paradigm for putting school choice into perspective is offered in this paper, which argues that the administrative model of setting standards and increasing funding is not working for American schools. Choice, based on the market model, is advocated as a way to provide incentives and opportunities for change. Although choice programs take time and encounter problems, they offer the following advantages: (1) they offset the inherent inequalities of the private market place; (2) controlled choice plans maintain the racial balance of a district; and (3) choice challenges districts to improve. Public opinion, measured in polls taken in 1986 and 1987 in Minnesota, favored choice of public schools. A triad based on policy, consumer information, and learning environment is described. School choice is a promising new policy, in which Nebraska, Iowa, Arkansas, and Minnesota are leading the way. (LMI)

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PUTTING PUBLIC SCHOOL CHOICE INTO PERSPECTIVE:
A NEW PARADIGM

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Imagine an environment in which students learn at their own rate, move through the system as they learn, have access to programs and teachers where mathematics, science, social studies, and English are taught at the highest levels, and where higher order thinking and learning how to learn are included in the curriculum.

Imagine an environment where students can participate in cooperative learning groups, have access to computers as a learning tool, are treated as members of a community where they are nurtured and cared for, and grow and develop as individuals.

With educational choice, every student can choose such an environment. It may be the school the student is presently attending or it may be a different one. In Nebraska, Iowa, Arkansas, and Minnesota, 100 percent of the students will soon be able to choose the learning environment they want.

Purposes of Education

In this knowledge-based economy, all children and adults must be educated for these three purposes:

1. growth and development of the individual;
2. citizenship; and
3. economic growth.

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Newly published reports and studies are featured in the print and broadcast media on a regular basis. The reports state that mathematics and science levels of secondary students in the United States are 13th out of 13 countries in the world, that the U.S. students' knowledge of economics is minimal, and that the U.S. student's knowledge of geography is almost nonexistent.

Administrative Model

The research studies keep coming and the reform movement of 1983 continues in the United States. The administrative model of setting standards and increasing dollars for education is not bringing the change which is needed.

Market Model

Since standards and dollars are working only to a limited extent, it is time to turn to incentives and opportunities. Choice provides the incentives for change. It is the market model. Choice provides opportunities for students, parents, teachers, and principals.

Incentives

Incentives for change will come as students opt for the learning environment which best meets their needs. Schools and districts will make the changes wanted by parents and students if they do not want the students to leave their school. They will provide information to the parents and students about the quality of their programs, and they will increase the quality if that is necessary.

Schools and districts will also respond to the changes in attitudes wanted by parents and students. We hear from both majority and minority parents about the need for changes and attitudes of some staff; but particularly from people of color, we hear that attitudes need to be changed. With educational

choice, these parents can choose the school where the individual student is valued.

Opportunities

Choice provides opportunities for teachers and principals. They may want to function through school-site management where they have the authority and discretion to make the changes wanted by parents and students. Or they may want to create a school within a school, or develop a charter school, or contract with the existing school or school district. The opportunity for teachers and principals to use their professional expertise in working directly with parents and students to provide the highest quality education is a possibility through choice.

Incentives and opportunities are different forces than money and standards for bringing about change. We need money and we need standards, but it is apparent that these two alone are not providing the quality of learning we need for all of our children and young adults. We need to add incentives and opportunities which is the philosophical base for educational choice.

New Idea

We are not all of one mind about educational choice. It is a new and literally disturbing idea, to change the system so that students get to school by choice rather than by assignment.

It will take time for the effects of this strategy to become known. Education is a very large system. It cannot be changed overnight, by any strategy.

It takes time for the information about the opportunity to get out to people. It takes time for them to decide whether to use it. It takes time

for districts to decide how to respond. It takes time for the pattern of district responses to be seen, and understood.

Problems

No transition of this sort can possibly be smooth. There would be problems in implementing any new strategy for improvement. There are problems with open enrollment.

There is the problem of deciding what is a problem and what is not. For example, is it a problem if students use their opportunity as a way of developing their co-curricular skills? Are the problems choice creates for the districts more important or are the problems that the absence of choice creates for the students more important?

Reasons for Choice

The reasons for educational choice are simple, yet profound. We are trying to improve equity in the public school system and we are trying to open up a route to the restructuring of the schools which so many people now agree is so essential. In regard to equity, it is important to understand that legislatures do not enact choice. Choice exists already. People have to go to school, but they do not have to go to any particular school or district. People have always had choice if they had money.

Nebraska, Iowa, Arkansas, and Minnesota are using public resources to extend the power and the opportunity of choice to those families in the state who do not have the resources to move to another district or to pay tuition to public or private schools. In other words, they are using public resources to offset the natural inequalities of the private marketplace.

Second, the programs are controlled-choice programs. They are controlled to make sure they operate on public school principles and to make sure they support the efforts states are making at racial balance.

Districts may not pick and choose their students as a private school may and a district under a state desegregation plan may decline to admit or decline to release students where transfers would worsen a situation with respect to racial balance.

Choice challenges districts to improve. This is a real purpose. The success of this program is not measured by the number of students who move. Governors and the legislatures are interested in causing districts to improve.

Our schools are good, but they need to improve and they can improve; especially in the job they do for students at risk of failure because of the family or social situation in which they are growing up.

Public Opinion

The American public wants choice. In 1986 and 1987 after the Minnesota plan appeared, the Gallup Poll asked: "Would you like to be able to choose the public school your children attend?" The first year 68 percent said "yes." The next year 71 percent said "yes."

The breakdowns are even more startling:

1. The strongest support comes from the biggest cities rather than from the smallest towns.
2. The strongest support comes from people of average income making between \$20,000 and \$30,000 a year.
3. The support is 70 percent among white Americans and the support is 77 percent among people of color.

Triad for Choice

In order to meet the promise of choice, we must think of the policy as one point of a triad. Another point is consumer information and the third point would be diversity of learning environments.

When we deal with consumer information, we know parents and students must understand their choices and they must receive counseling. They may also need assistance in decision making.

Consumer information includes knowledge of programs, teachers, students, achievement of students, activities, organization, governance, curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Parents need to know about education and learning environments, but first of all, must know what they want for their child. They must understand human growth and development, see how their child is growing and developing, and then make wise decisions about how a particular learning environment will benefit their child. Parents need to consider their personal values, attitudes and philosophies when they are making a choice.

Diversity in learning environments has grown over the past several years. Much attention has been given to making the school fit the student rather than trying to make the student fit the school. Other alternatives need to be designed and developed.

Attention must be given to both consumer information and the diversity of learning environments as we continue to implement the policy of choice.

Assessment

The decade of the 90s will bring assessment of educational choice. It will be exciting to research this promising new public policy. Nebraska,

Iowa, Arkansas, and Minnesota are leading the way in providing incentives and opportunities through choice. Parents and students are involved in decision-making. Choice will continue to drive other changes in education.